

Media's Dark Cloud a Danger
Falsely bleak reports reduce our chances of success in Iraq

Letter printed in *The Atlanta Constitution*, September 22, 2003

On Sept. 14, I flew from Baghdad to Kuwait with Sgt. Trevor A. Blumberg from Dearborn, Mich. He was in a body bag. He'd been ambushed and killed that afternoon. Sitting in the cargo bay of a C 130E, I found myself wondering whether the news media were somehow complicit in his death.

News media reports about our progress in Iraq have been bleak since shortly after the president's premature declaration of victory. These reports contrast sharply with reports of hope and progress presented to Congress by Department of Defense representatives -- a real disconnect, Vietnam déjà vu. So I went to Iraq with six other members of Congress to see for myself.

The Iraq war has predictably evolved into a guerrilla conflict similar to Vietnam. Our currently stated objectives are to establish reasonable security and foster the creation of a secular, representative government with a stable market economy that provides broad opportunity throughout Iraqi society. Attaining these objectives in Iraq would inevitably transform the Arab world and immeasurably increase our future national security.

These are goals worthy of a fight, of sacrifice, of more lives lost now to save thousands, perhaps tens or hundreds of thousands in the future. In Mosul last Monday, a colonel in the 101st Airborne put it to me quite simply: "Sir, this is worth doing." No one I spoke with said anything different. And I spoke with all ranks.

But there will be more Blumbergs killed in action, many more. So it is worth doing only if we have a reasonable chance of success. And we do, but I'm afraid the news media are hurting our chances. They are dwelling upon the mistakes, the ambushes, the soldiers killed, the wounded, the Blumbergs. Fair enough. But it is not balancing this

bad news with "the rest of the story," the progress made daily, the good news. The falsely bleak picture weakens our national resolve, discourages Iraqi cooperation and emboldens our enemy.

During the conventional part of this conflict, embedded journalists reported the good, the bad and the ugly. Where are the embeds now that we are in the difficult part of the war, now that fair and balanced reporting is critically important to our chances of success? At the height of the conventional conflict, Fox News alone had 27 journalists embedded with U.S. troops (out of a total of 774 from all Western media). Today there are only 27 embedded journalists from all media combined.

Throughout Iraq, American soldiers with their typical "can do" attitude and ingenuity are engaging in thousands upon thousands of small reconstruction projects, working with Iraqi contractors and citizens. Through decentralized decision-making by unit commanders, the 101st Airborne Division alone has spent nearly \$23 million in just the past few months. This sum goes a very long way in Iraq. Hundreds upon hundreds of schools are being renovated, repainted, replumbed and reroofed. Imagine the effect that has on children and their parents.

Zogby International recently released the results of an August poll showing hope and progress. My own unscientific surveys told me the same thing. With virtually no exceptions, hundreds of Iraqis enthusiastically waved back at me as I sat in the open door of a helicopter traveling between Babylon and Baghdad. And I received a similar reception as I worked my way alone, shaking hands through a large crowd of refinery workers just to see their reaction.

We may need a few credible Baghdad Bobs to undo the harm done by our media. I'm afraid it is killing our troops.